LOVE

March 8, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Genesis 12:1-8
John 3:1-17

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..."
John 3:16a (RSV)

He came at night to see Jesus. He told his wife he was going for a walk because he couldn't sleep, which was true. He didn't tell her where he was going, because he hadn't decided yet, or if he had decided, it was in that back compartment of his mind where difficult, complex decisions are made and then kept secret, even from the rest of the mind. After twenty minutes or so, walking along dark streets, in and out of the shadows, not exactly furtively, but not deliberately either, he found himself standing in front of a house where Jesus of Nazareth was staying the night.

It would not have been a good idea to be seen there. Nicodemus had become expert over the years in the fine art of being prudent, cautious, playing it safe. He was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, the high court in Jerusalem which actually governed the nation under Roman occupation. The Sanhedrin was composed of respected men representing the Pharisees and the Saducees. There were lawyers attached to the Sanhedrin whose job it was to interpret the Law of Moses. The lawyers were called Scribes. The presiding officer of the Sanhedrin was the Chief Priest. His name was Caiaphas. His job was the unenviable task of keeping alive some semblance of pride and identity among the leaders of Israel, while at the same time maintaining open and amicable relations with the Roman authorities.

Nicodemus was an impressive man, an admirable man. He had managed to accomplish what anyone in his or any age aspires to become: successful and respected by his peers. He had also become expert at the delicate art of maintaining his successfulness and respectability in trying, and sometimes dangerous circumstances. He had learned to be careful.

It had begun for him in the middle of what later generations would call mid-life. His was more of a mid-life compromise than a crisis, which is the way it is for most of us. Only the more spectacular mid-life crises

get all the press. Nobody much notices a "mid-life compromise." The fire in Nicodemus had simply begun to diminish. The heated passion which in his youth had given birth to high personal ideals and higher hopes for his nation had been tempered by the cold reality of Roman occupation. The deep lust for life expressed in his marriage, parenthood, friendships and his sense of vocation had been moderated and diminished along the way and had become a more modest and realistic, "getting by one day at a time." The purity of his devotion to God had been modified by the necessities of surviving as a religious and political leader under the watchful eye of the Romans. People like Nicodemus are frequently eliminated, executed, by the occupying power. Nicodemus didn't take chances. He had decided to survive, not to become a martyr - at least foolishly. And so he did what was expected of him and expected little back. Along the way he had learned that the way to do it was to discipline himself not to feel deeply enough about anything to call it love. He had decided not to care deeply about anything in order not to be vulnerable, physically or emotionally.

So he came at night to talk with Jesus of Nazareth because it would have been unwise, perhaps even dangerous, to be seen in the company of one who was known to be a bit of a trouble-maker. But he did come and the reason he came was that something about Jesus seemed to reveal everything about himself. Something about Jesus judged him for the way he was living, for what he had become. And, in the course of the conversation, Jesus of Nazareth told Nicodemus, the Pharisee, that he needed to be born anew.

Now this encounter has been observed and discussed and studied endlessly. I think Frederick Buechner catches something of the special flavor of the conversation, when, with tongue in cheek, he writes...

> "That was all very well, Nicodemus said, but just how were you supposed to pull a thing like that off? How especially were you to pull it off if you were pushing sixty-five? How did you get born again when it was a challenge just to get out of bed in the morning? He even got a little sarcastic. Could a man enter a second time into his mother's womb, he asked, when it was all he could do to enter a taxi without the driver coming around to give him a shove from behind?"
> [Peculiar Treasures, p. 122]

Now a funny thing happens at this point in the story. Nicodemus, being a prudent, rational man, asks for clarity about this "born anew" business. Jesus launches into a homily about a spiritual birth, and the wind blowing wherever it wants to blow, and seems to be saying that the spirit of God is responsible for this rebirth. It's pretty vague - to Nicodemus and so he asks another question and Jesus starts to answer and then curiously the conversation stops, Nicodemus fades and even Jesus stops talking and the author takes over, in a kind of voice-over commentary, like those sports announcers who superimpose their voices at a critical moment on television... "Watson approaches the ball for this important thirty foot attempt." This voice-over commentator says to his audience: "Listen...For

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." May I paraphrase? "God so loves the world that he gave Jesus so that people like Nicodemus don't have to watch their waning years trickle through their fingers like dry ashes, but instead may live life fully, intentionally, joyfully." The author of this Gospel wants Nicodemus to remind us that God loves us and wants to save us from perishing right in the middle of our lives. The author is stretching to proclaim a love big enough to save us from the death which creeps into the middle of life.

How can this be? That's a good question. That's so good that when Nicodemus asked it for us, the answer he got was something like this... "The reality of God's love for the world and for you is very simple and so very profound that you're going to have to let go of a lot of things you believe, a lot of things you are hanging on to, even to hear it. In fact, you have to start all over again, be born again, in order to know this magnificent reality."

Come with me, please, as we dig into this. This author is putting on the table one of the radical religious ideas in all of history. It is that at the center of things is a creator - an intender - a source of all being, and that the fundamental characteristic of that source of all being is love. This author is proposing that there is a God who loves the world - and that because that is true there is available to every man and every woman, a kind of life which is new, whole, full, deeply lived, deeply meant, deeply joyful. It is available now. It is the life that God intended when he breathed divine breath - another word for which is "spirit" - into human beings. The name this author chose for it was "eternal life." It means "real life." The "real thing," lived fully, without the compromises. It means a quality of living in the present tense so radically different and unlike the kind of life we lead when left to our own devices that it requires a starting all over again, and it appears like a rebirth - feels like a rebirth - when it happens.

Not to be born again, not to know and come to terms with the love that God has for you, is to risk something this author calls "perishing." Now, that idea has been subjected to a fair amount of abuse. If you tune into one of the popular television evangelists, you will learn that "born again" means a certain, prescribed conversion experience, preferably dramatic and instantaneous and that the "perish" part is, in fact, a very graphic threat of eternal torment. Is that what we mean? Is that what this author meant to leave for the ages - the suggestion that the person who (1) doesn't experience a classic rebirth or (2) looks at life and doesn't feel loved or (3) looks at Jesus and doesn't feel anything or (4) looks at Jesus and doesn't believe he was anything but an idealistic rabbi - that those people - one of whom you and I have been at some time - that it's curtains for those people forever: that if you don't, won't or can't believe it, God's love no longer has power in your life? So, this time around on this familiar passage, I took time, grudgingly at first, and got the Greek-English Lexicon down from the shelf and did what we preachers would like to do every week but mostly don't. I did as thorough job as I

could trying to track down that word the author used which is translated "perish." That is to say, I thought it would be a good idea to discover what that original author wanted to say about what happens if you don't believe in Jesus as an expression of God's love for the world. Now if you are on the edge of your seat, waiting for the answer, you might want to relax a bit because as usual there is more than one answer. The critical Greek word (apollynai) means "to be ruined, to be destroyed, and to be lost."

> God so loved the world that he gave
> his only son, that whoever believes in
> him - should not be lost - should not
> be wasted - but have eternal life -
> should not begin to die before they
> are done living.

It's the same Greek word - "apollynai" - that Matthew uses to describe sheep that go astray. It's the same word that Luke uses to describe a young son wandering and lost in a far country, cut off from his parents' love.

I just violated one of the fundamental guidelines for preaching and that is never to risk boring a congregation with the dry processes of Biblical exegesis. I did it because we have such trouble with this topic, we mainline types. We don't know what to make of this "born again" hype. We don't know what to make of what sounds like the theological equivalent of "do it or else - believe it or perish."

God loves the world so much he gave an only son - so that people who, by grace, believe that, do not perish, do not get lost.

If you can't get into that theologically: if it doesn't make sense intellectually, let's come at it from the human side. Let's talk about what it takes to live a full human life. Mother Teresa of Calcutta put it as plainly and as passionately as I have ever read it:

> "In these twenty years of work amongst
> the people, I have come more and more
> to realize that it is being unwanted that
> is the worst disease that any human being
> can ever experience. Nowadays we have
> found medicine for leprosy and lepers can
> be cured. There's medicine for tuberculosis-
> For all kinds of diseases there are medicines
> and cures. But for being unwanted, except there
> are willing hands to serve and there's
> a loving heart to love, I don't think this
> terrible disease can ever be cured."
> [Something Beautiful for God, Malcolm Muggeridge, p. 98]

Mother Teresa, as you know, and her Missionaries of Charity gather the critically ill from the streets of Calcutta, so that before they die they will know what it feels like to be wanted and loved, i.e. what it means to be alive.

If the streets of Calcutta are remote, let's bring it closer to home, to this city, this parish even. People come here every day for no other reason than there is no one else in all of life to remind them that they matter, that they are loved...

In San Francisco, Fr. Giles Valcovich is the chaplain at St. Francis Memorial Hospital - where his ministry has become dealing with dying AIDS victims... He soon learned that terrible spiritual pain as well as the critical physical symptom - "how much they hated being categorized - as if they were all atheists." Fr. Valcovich adheres to his church's ethical stances - but has the grace to affirm God's unconditional love... "It's been so long since some patients have received the sacraments that when I give them communion, they're crying - and I'm crying too." [Second Opinion, Vol. Three, "Healing A City: AIDS in San Francisco"]

We have discovered the sociological and political truth of the dynamic. We have learned, tragically, that when people are told that they don't matter and aren't wanted, something dies in them, and is replaced frequently by anger, rage and violence. People who are told they don't matter experience a devastating loss in self-esteem, which becomes self-loathing and before long anti-social, hostile and self destructive behavior. Terrorists - people capable of suicidal terrorism, are convinced that life doesn't matter - their own or anyone else's. We have learned that there is nothing more devastating personally than to be told that you don't matter, that you are not loved and embraced and cared for. We have learned that an unwanted and unloved child is probably not going to be very lovable, which will distance him/her even further from the love he/she needs... and that "perish" is not too strong to describe what, in fact, happens. We know that the saddest words are often spoken by the alone elderly who say to us - "What's the use? Why bother - taking my medicine, or eating right, or making plans for a new place - What's the use? I don't matter to anybody anymore."

> "God so loves the world that he gave his son so that whoever believes in him will not perish."

God so loves - The Gospel writer cannot restrain himself. Nicodemus must know. He is loved. God loves. God is love. It is the great mystery of creation. It is the great Christian secret. It is the Christian answer to philosophy's profoundest dilemma, "Why is there a world in the first place?" Because God is love. Because at the heart of reality is this love which God has for the creation and for the men and women in the creation.

We keep trying to say it right and the idea is simply bigger than the words. But sometimes we can see it. In the Presbyterian tradition we try to dramatize it, act it out so we all can see - as, for instance, on those wonderful occasions when we baptize -hold up an infant, one newly born and say, in effect, "this is it - this is what God means - this gift - this potential - this love made flesh."

And in our own loving and being loved, the gift of intimacy which is given to us, the sacramental loving which happens in our own relationships,

we know the life giving power of God's love.

What we are invited to believe is that God wants us, every single individual of us, to know that we are loved: that God wants us to live fully, wholly, joyfully. We are invited to embrace this mystery - that in Jesus Christ God has reached down and found us, and loved us, and saved us.

To know it is to be born anew.

Malcom Muggeridge, former editor of Punch, crusty, erudite, cynical English intellectual... became a believer when he saw God's love for the world not as an abstraction - but reflected in the love of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Muggeridge was doing a BBC Documentary and he fell in love. It set off in him a whole new ability to be alive - by loving - as he now knew himself to be loved.

He wrote later:

"It sounds crazy, as it did to Nicodemus -
who asked how in the world it was possible
for someone already born to go back into
the womb and to be born again. Yet it
happens: it has happened innumberable times.
Suddenly caught up in the wonder of God's
love flooding the universe, made aware of the
stupendous creativity which animates all of life, -
every colour brighter, every meaning clearer,
every shape more shapely, every note more
musical, above all every human face, all human
companionship, recognizably a family affair -
all irradiated with this same new glory in the
the eyes of the reborn."
[Christ and the Media, p. 74,75]

The invitation is to newness. And it begins, I propose, not necessarily with a prescribed emotional upheaval, or moral crisis, but with a deep realization that against all the odds, there is a God who cares deeply about us. It begins when, like a light in the darkness, we know that we are loved unconditionally and wanted and accepted.

You are invited to believe that. You are invited to believe that among all the fancy theologies of the Incarnation the most important one is this... Jesus Christ is God's love for you. You are invited to know that God wants your life to be full and joyful and eternal: that, in fact, God wants to make a lover of life out of you.

God wants you to live fully - by learning how to love again... God wants you to know how deeply you are loved so that you will be willing to be honest about the self-protecting compromises you have been making and to care deeply enough again to risk vulnerability - about life, about your own life - about another human being - about the whole human race - and yes, about God, who so loves the world.

God wants you to know that you are loved - and to help with the task of passing it on, of getting the word out.

God wants to make a lover out of you.

God so loves you - he gave his only son.

Nicodemus...? Nicodemus went on with his business for three years or so, and was, along the way, reborn. He was still respected. But he laughed more and he loved a lot more and he was a lot less cautious and in a new way a lot more passionate. He was born anew. How do we know? I've taken some liberties... I've speculated about him but we know something happened to him. We know he was born anew because there is a conclusion to his story or at least another chapter. On the day of the public execution of Jesus of Nazareth, Nicodemus appears again, with his friend Joseph, of all places in the office of Pontius Pilate, asking for the body in order to anoint it and properly and lovingly bury it. This time he came in the broad light of day.

Amen.